

RELIGIOUS

LEGISLATION:

*Shall God or Civil Rulers Govern
the Conscience?*

A LIVE ISSUE IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA.

The Religious Liberty Proclamation of our
Royal Sovereign,

QUEEN VICTORIA,

AND

Testimonials from National and State Constitutions
on the Rights of Conscience.

BY

JOHN T. COOKE.

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A striking feature of our times is the tendency towards the union of Church and State. Persistent demands are being made, asking legislative bodies to enact laws pertaining to and regulating religious customs, observances and institutions. In harmony with the spirit of this movement, a bill entitled "An Act to secure the better observance of the Lord's Day," was introduced in the Dominion Parliament and read for the second time, March 6, 1890. In this bill are prohibited all kinds of work, except "household offices of daily necessity or other works of necessity or charity," on pain of a fine varying from one to fifty dollars, together with costs attending the prosecution. In default of payment of the same, the offender shall be committed to the common gaol. Presently, some of our well-meaning citizens are zealously engaged in gathering signatures to a petition, praying that such a bill may become law. Doubtless their purpose is to promote the interests of religion and build up the kingdom of Christ. Although their motives

may be good, these men, advocating religious legislation, and teaching the people to favor the same, must have forgotten that this was not the power used by the Master in establishing the truths of Christianity. They cannot be aware of the evil consequences which have always and necessarily attended the enforcing of religious principles by the arm of the civil authority. The question involved, is one of momentous importance. It is this: Have *human* legislators the right to enter the domain of conscience, and dictate to man his personal duties to God? Does the regulation of religious observances fall within the jurisdiction of civil governments?

Christ, in his answer to the Pharisees, who came to him with an enquiry about paying tribute, draws a clear line of distinction between civil and religious duties. "Show me the tribute money," said Christ, "and they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Cæsar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Matt. xxii. 19, 20, 21. By Cæsar, our Saviour meant the Roman government, and, in applying the general principle here stated, Cæsar represents civil governments in general. It is evident, therefore, from these words of Christ, that civil government has claims upon us which we are bound to respect, and also that there are matters which belong to God *with which Cæsar has nothing to do*. They are to be rendered to God and not to Cæsar. In regard to the "Act to secure the better observance of the Lord's day," we enquire: Whose image and superscription does it bear? They say unto us, God's; for it is "*the Lord's day*" that this proposed legislation pertains to. We reply in

the language of Christ: "*Render unto God the things that are God's.*" According to Christ's teachings, civil governments can have no more to do with enforcing the observance of the Lord's day than of the Lord's Supper, the Lord's prayer, or any other religious rite, ceremony or observance.

The apostle Paul, in the thirteenth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, gives us instruction in regard to our duties to civil rulers. He clearly defines the attributes of civil power, the limits of its jurisdiction, and enjoins upon the subjects obedience to the same. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." Verse 1. "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." Verse 2. In verses 6, 7 and 8 he enumerates some of the duties we owe to the civil rulers. "For, for this cause *pay ye tribute* also; for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon *this very thing*. Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Owe no man anything," etc. In verse 9 he quotes, from the ten commandments, those precepts which relate only to civil duties, making no reference to those relating to our duties towards God. Then, in summing up, he adds, "If there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*" Therefore, if all our duties towards the higher powers are contained in the above statement—"Love thy neighbor as thyself,"—it is evident that only man's relation to man or to the state, fall within the jurisdiction of the civil power, and that none of the duties of man to his Creator, such as are

enjoined by the first four commandments of the moral law, are to be enforced by Cæsar or civil governments. That in matters of faith man is accountable alone to God, is clearly shown by the apostle in the next chapter. In dwelling upon religious observances he says, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his *own master* he standeth or falleth." Verse 4. "*So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.*" Verse 12. We find that Paul's manner of life was in perfect harmony with his teachings, for, while he enjoined and practised faithful obedience to the governments in regard to civil matters, he fearlessly disregarded the authority of the same respecting religious laws. The "powers that be," of which he writes, was, in his day, the Roman power, and among their laws we find the following :

"Worship the gods in all respects according to the laws of your country, and compel all others to do the same. But hate and punish those who would introduce anything whatever alien to our customs in this particular." * * * * "Whoever introduces new religions, the tendency and character of which are unknown, whereby the minds of men may be disturbed, shall, if belonging to the higher rank, be banished ; if to the lower, punished with death."

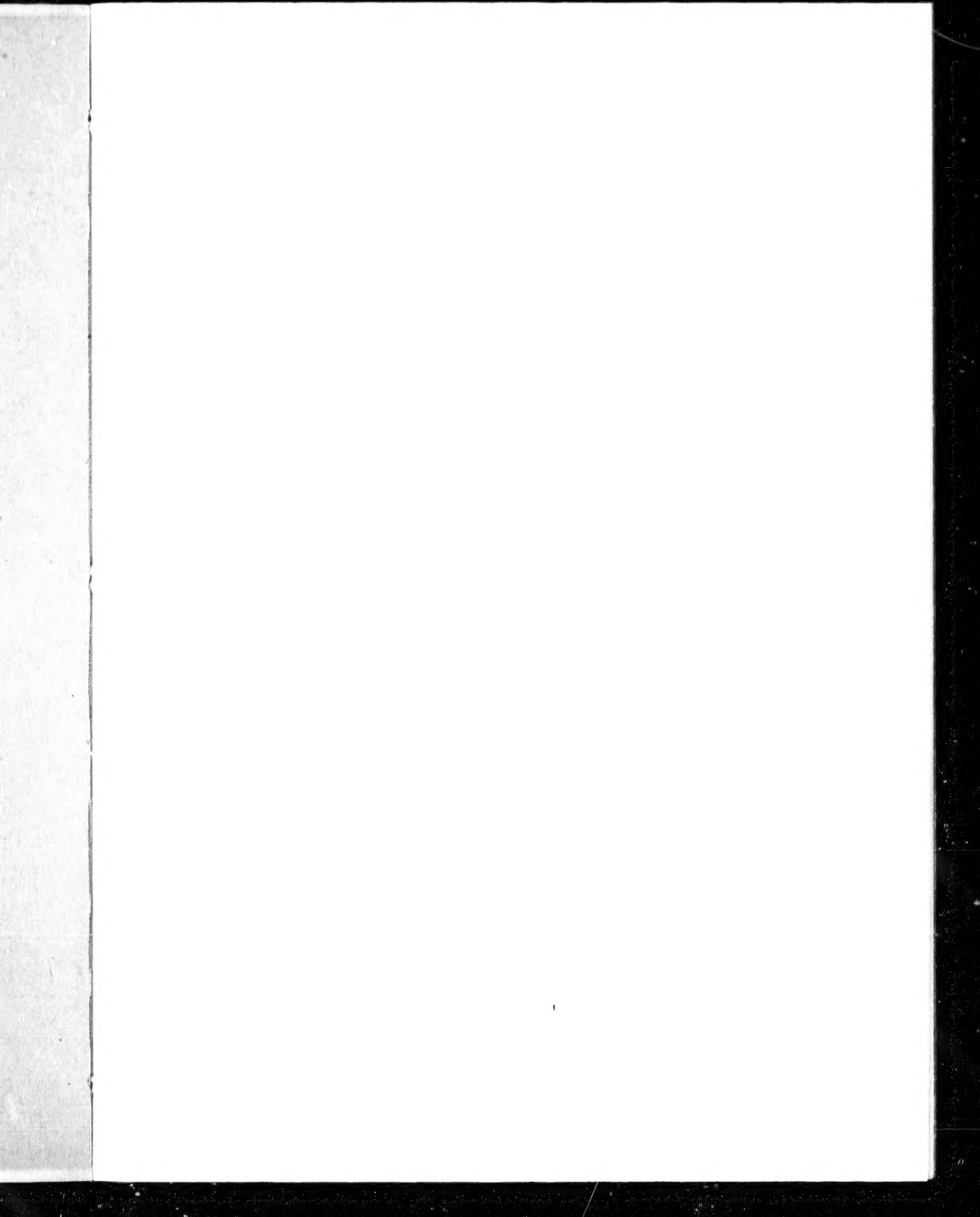
Yet, in the face of such stringent religious enactments, the great apostle went forth preaching Christ as a divine being, and teaching the world to forsake the false gods upheld by Roman laws, and worship the true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Dragged before the Roman tribunals, he is accused on every side. "These," say the blind and enraged multitude, "that have turned the world upside down . . . do

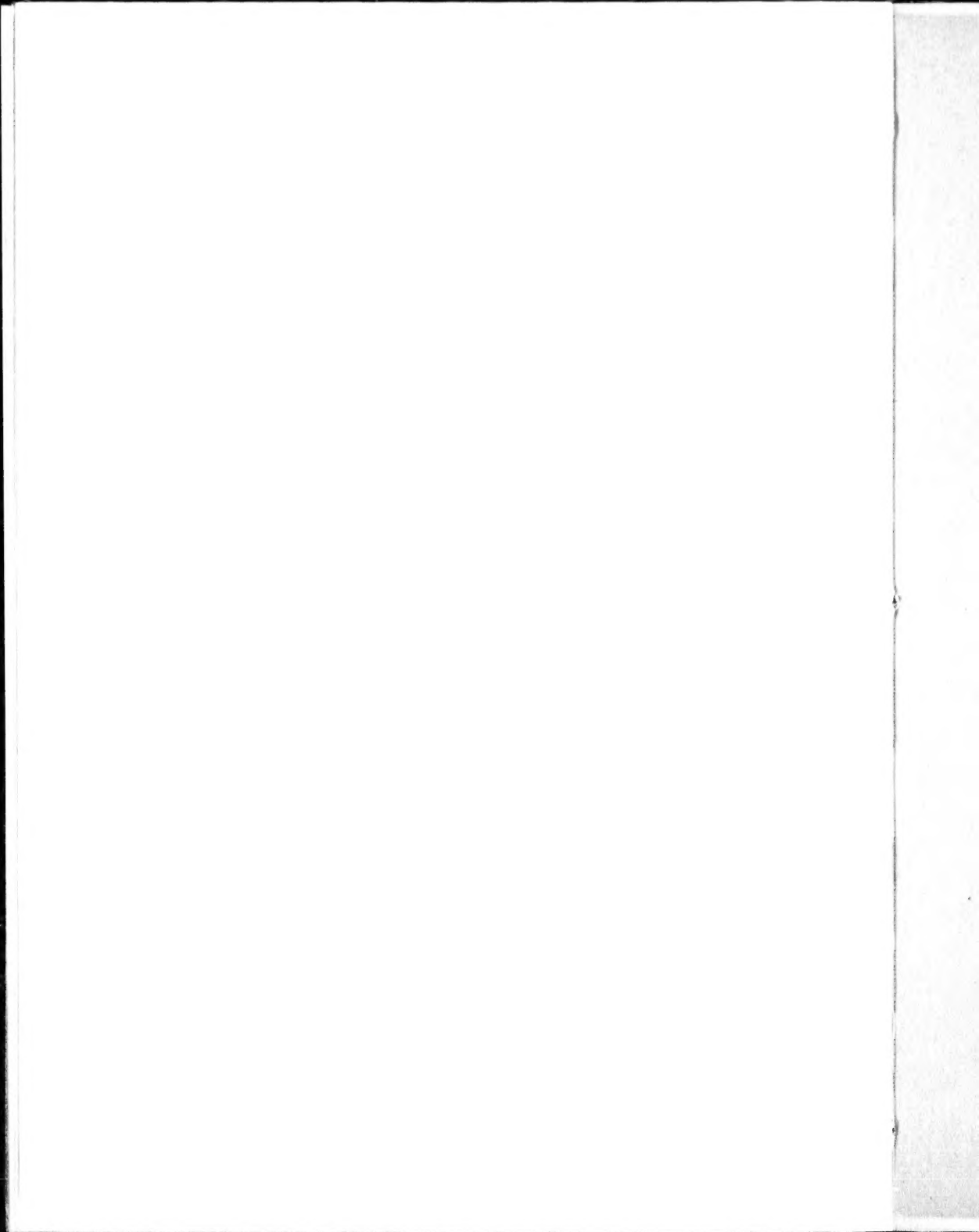
contrary to the decrees of Cæsar." Acts xvii. 6, 7. "These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city; and teach customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans." Acts xvi. 20, 21. We next find him thrust into the inner prison and his feet made fast in the stocks. But God, intervening, delivers him by miraculous power. The foundations of the prison are shaken, the doors swing open, and the apostle is freed. Immediately, still within the walls of his prison, with unrelenting zeal he preaches the gospel. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," says he to the Roman jailer, "and thou shalt be saved."

Paul, in resisting the power, was only carrying out the teaching of the Master. "Behold," says Christ, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." "Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles." "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matt. x. 16, 18, 28. "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Matt. xxviii. 19, 20.

In Old Testament times, we find the same course pursued by God's servants, in their relation to civil rulers. They faithfully obeyed civil laws, but disregarded laws, enacted by civil governments, which interfered with their religious duties.

The Babylonian Empire was certainly a power ordained of God (See Jer. xxvii. 7), yet the three faithful Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, being well aware of that fact, refused obedience to Nebuchadnezzar's decree





which commanded every one of his subjects to fall down and worship the great image which he had set up. They reply to the decree: "Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." They are cast into the fiery furnace, but the God whom they worship comes to their rescue and delivers them from the flames, thus sustaining them in their apparent rebellion.

The Medo-Persian Empire was also ordained of God (See 2 Chronicles, xxxvi. 22, 23), but not ordained to rule in religious matters. The prophet Daniel, who was Prime Minister in this kingdom, was so faithful in obeying civil laws, that his enemies could find no fault with him; but when a law was enacted interfering with his religious convictions, he paid no attention to it. Thus we read: "Now, when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime." (Daniel vi. 10.) For this act of disobedience to the royal decree, he was cast into the den of lions. He chose liberty of conscience, with the society of the wild beasts in their den, rather than to yield this precious boon and dwell with royal princes. God sustained the prophet in disregarding this religious law, by protecting him from harm in the lions' den. When Daniel is again liberated, he proclaims his innocence before both God and the king.

If the principle be admitted, that the state has the right to legislate in regard to religion, and to enforce religious observances, then no blame can be attached to the Babylonian king for casting the Hebrew children

into the fiery furnace; to the Medo-Persian king, for delivering Daniel to the lions; nor to the Roman Empire for putting the Christians to death. And Christ, his apostles and the millions of earnest Christians, who have sealed their faith with their blood, were wrong, in resisting the civil power and teaching a religion, declared to be unlawful by the Roman Government. All the religious persecutions of the dark ages, the unspeakable horrors of the Inquisition, the rack, the thumbscrew, the stake and the dungeon, were but the natural offspring of an illegitimate union between Church and State. Every attempt to make men religious by law, will only produce a hypocritical profession, and of necessity revive the same spirit of persecution. All this is contrary to the Gospel. "The weapons of our warfare," says Paul, "are not *carnal*, but mighty *through God* to the pulling down of strongholds." (2 Corinthians, x. 4.)

Do we need a law enforcing Sunday observance? Who will be benefited by such a law? Do Christian people who believe the first day of the week to be the Lord's Day need the force of law to compel them to abstain from work on that day? The Apostle tells us that the "*Gospel is the power of God* unto salvation to every one that believeth." (Romans i. 16.) Has that power so far departed from the Church, as to require the aid of legislation, to secure from its members, obedience to what they regard as a Christian duty? If it be true that she is thus shorn of her strength, instead of applying to Parliament it were better far that she send up to God her fervent and earnest petitions. One ray of light from the Throne of Heaven will do more toward promoting the interests of Christianity than all the laws that human governments can ever invent. Christ bade his disciples :

"Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem until ye be endued with power *from on high*." (Luke xxiv. 49.) And when that power came, three thousand souls were converted in one day. The Christian religion made its way into the world, in opposition to all human governments. Banishment, tortures, and death were inflicted in vain to stop its progress. And now, that the Church is endowed with the moral and intellectual force of such a host of religious teachers, with the powerful auxiliary of the Press at her command, and the omnipotent arm of God still extended to sustain his work, is it not surprising that some of her votaries, should be circulating a petition in which they tell us, in plaintive accents, that the "*sacredness of the Lord's Day* is in many ways *imperilled* in our land," praying the government to come to the *rescue* by enacting laws which will enforce its "*proper observance*" by fines and imprisonment? as though the Church, struck with spiritual paralysis, was about to drop her hands and to consign her mission to the magistrates.

"But," says one, "what about the Jewish people, who do not believe in Christ; also the unconverted and the infidel? We need a law to oblige them to observe the Lord's Day." What! *compel a man to be religious*? You may as well drag an unbeliever to the communion table, and oblige him to partake of the Lord's Supper, as to compel him by fines and imprisonment to keep the Lord's Day. So long as he interferes with no one's rights, he is accountable alone to God for his *religious faith*, and to use compulsion would only be making him a hypocrite. Civil government should regard the religious convictions of the Jew as *sacred* as that of the Christian; and it has no more right to adopt *any* measure binding the conscience of *one solitary individual* than that

of the entire community. If parliament can enforce *one* principle of religion, it may with equal propriety proceed to define *every* part of divine revelation, and enforce *every* religious obligation. The flood-gates of religious legislation, once opened, it would be difficult for human sagacity to foresee how rapid would be the succession and how numerous the train of enactments which would follow, involving the dearest rights of all—the rights of conscience.

Then, there exists in the Dominion a body of Christians denominated "Seventh Day Adventists." They have a regularly-organized conference, and possess numerous churches. As the name implies, one of the articles of their faith is the observance of the seventh day as the Sabbath or Lord's Day. They regard the fourth precept of the moral law as still binding, and conscientiously observe that day as one of rest and worship. Are they not entitled to the same religious freedom as that enjoyed by other Christian bodies? Must they servilely obey the dictates of a majority? Are their rights and privileges as conscientious men less sacred for their being in the minority? Any man sacrificing his religious convictions to the caprice of the majority is not worthy the name of Christian. Would the Protestants of the Province of Quebec submit to the majority, and conform to all the rites, ceremonies and holy days of the Church of Rome? Or how would the members of the Catholic Church like to trim their faith until in perfect harmony with Protestantism in the provinces where they are in minority? We are not contending for the correctness of any particular religious views, but we assert that it is man's inalienable birthright to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience, and this assertion is confirmed by Queen Victoria, our Royal Sovereign.

In a proclamation issued to her subjects in 1858 Her Majesty expresses herself thus clearly and emphatically :

"Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects. We declare it to be our Royal will and pleasure that none be in any wise favored, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observance, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law ; and we do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us, that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects, on pain of our highest displeasure."

The wisdom of the Province of Quebec, assembled in council, in harmony with Her Royal will, has placed among her laws the following statute :—

"The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship without discrimination or preference, so as the same be not made an excuse for acts of licentiousness, or a justification of practices inconsistent with the peace and safety of the province, are, by the constitution and laws of this province, allowed to all Her Majesty's subjects within the same."

The following testimonials, from high authorities in our neighboring Republic express the same truth.

George Washington, the Father of American liberties, said :—

"Every man who conducts himself as a good citizen is accountable alone to God for his religious faith, and should be protected in worshipping God according to the dictates of his own conscience."

The first amendment of the United States Constitution illustrative of the same principle, reads thus :—

"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Each state has incorporated in its constitution a guarantee of religious freedom, of which the following quotations are samples :

NEW YORK.—“The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall for ever be allowed in this State to all mankind.”

PENNSYLVANIA.—“All men have a natural and indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences. No preference shall ever be given by law to any religious establishments or modes of worship.”

WISCONSIN.—“The right of every man to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of his own conscience shall never be infringed. . . . Nor shall any control of, or interference with, the rights of conscience be permitted, or any preference be given by law to any religious establishments or mode of worship.”

VERMONT.—“That all men have a natural and unalienable right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences and understandings, as in their opinion shall be regulated by the Word of God. . . . No authority can or ought to be vested in, or assumed by, any power whatever that shall in any case interfere with, or in any manner control the rights of conscience.”

RHODE ISLAND.—“Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free, and all attempts to influence it by temporal punishment, or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, we therefore declare . . . that every man shall be free to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, and to profess, and by argument to maintain, his opinion in matters of religion.”

Said U. S. Grant: “Keep the Church and State for ever separated;” and so should say all civil rulers.

Said Jesus Christ: “My kingdom is not of this world;” and so should say all Christian teachers.

To those religious teachers who would seek to compel and persecute him who may believe otherwise than they, we commend the words of the apostle Paul in the fourteenth chapter of Romans: “Why dost thou judge thy brother, or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”



